

UAB study, the university creates \$7.2 billion annually in Alabama economic growth and employs one in every thirty-one Alabama workers (University of Alabama at Birmingham 2017). Birmingham has additionally attracted a slate of new technology startups, such as the grocery delivery service Shipt (Hogan 2019). Huntsville, with its aerospace industry, including NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, Redstone Arsenal, and the recently announced U.S. Space Command headquarters, has been one of Alabama's fastest-growing cities, with high rates of education and income and low rates of unemployment (McDonald 2019; Roop 2021).

11. Census population data is available at the following web address: <http://www.t.ly/q8xW>.

12. Voter registration figures are available from the Alabama Secretary of State's office and include registration by race: <http://www.t.ly/YpNs>.

13. Indeed, Trump has been accused of embodying the politics of symbolic White, Christian nationalism (e.g., Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018).

14. Much of this legislative agenda has been challenged in court, however, with partial success.

15. See Alabama Code § 26-22-3.

16. See Alabama Code § 26-3A-4.

17. See Alabama Code § 26-23E-7.

18. See Alabama Code § 26-21-4.

19. See *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, 798 N.E.2d 941 (2003).

20. See Alabama Constitution of 1901, Amendment 774.

21. See note 6 above.

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The Rational Southerner

*Black Mobilization, Republican Growth,
and the Partisan Transformation of the
American South*

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2012

OXFORD

180

for all intents and purposes, no Republican Party at all until the 1970s. We also showed that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, Southern Republicanism was ubiquitous in every state in both the Rim South and the Deep South.

The growth in Southern Republicanism was matched by a similar growth in the mobilization of the black population. In 1960, fewer than 30 percent of voting age African Americans in the South had registered to vote. By 2008, nearly three-quarters of all voting-age African American Southerners had registered to vote. Although there is evidence that black mobilization was growing before the passage of the VRA in 1965 (see Timpona 1995), there is little question that the VRA provided the impetus for this broad and dramatic increase in voter registration.

The mobilization of the African American population was a regionwide phenomenon in the South over the past half-century, but as we showed in chapter 8, the extent of black mobilization was not uniform across states and counties. The data clearly indicate that some areas experienced significantly greater mobilization than others. It is also apparent that mobilization occurred more rapidly in some areas than in others. The areas with the largest increase in mobilization, however, were not often the same areas in which mobilization increased most rapidly.

As the existing literature would suggest, we see that black mobilization spiked with significant political events, such as the Jackson campaign in 1984 and the Obama campaign and election in 2008. But other patterns in black mobilization are not easily explained by existing research. In chapter 8, we highlighted the fact that we find no evidence of a positive relationship between income and black mobilization at either the state or the substate level. There is little reason to think that the particular type of political participation on which we focus—registering to vote—is likely to be primarily a function of black empowerment, another important aspect of the research on black political participation.

The theory of *relative advantage* outlined in chapter 3 helps us understand this dramatic Southern transformation. It also provides a logic that highlights the intersection of the two pillars of the disintegration of the “Solid South”—the mobilization of African Americans and the growth of the GOP. As African Americans flowed into the electorate (and overwhelmingly the Democratic Party), white conservatives bolted for the Republican Party. Although the competitiveness of the Southern Republicans and the organizational strength of the Republican Party in the South had an independent impact on subsequent GOP growth, we saw a strong relationship between black electoral strength and GOP growth even when accounting for variation

181

in the strength of other factors. In chapter 4, we illustrated the dynamics of relative advantage with detailed case studies and a wealth of archival data.

We saw this dynamic in patterns of GOP growth clearly and consistently at the state level (in chapter 5) and at the county/parish level (in chapter 6). Somewhat surprisingly given the limitations of the data, we also found evidence of this dynamic at the individual level (although this effect was mediated). We also found that the mobilization of the African American electorate had a substantial effect on GOP growth in the face of controls for other traditional explanations, such as income growth, in-migration, and evangelicalism. Simply put, we found, as the theory of relative advantage predicted, that the growth of Southern Republicanism was *primarily* driven by racial dynamics, not class, demographic factors, or religion, as others have suggested. Though we are suggesting a distinctive dynamic, in this important respect our work mirrors Key's (1949) seminal text on Southern politics. At the midpoint of the last century, according to Key, Southern politics revolved around the issue of race. Southern politics in the early twenty-first century still revolves around the issue of race.

Much of the recent research on Southern politics—Lublin (2004) and Shafer and Johnston (2004, 2006) are prominent examples—argues that the role of race in modern Southern politics has been overemphasized and that the key to understanding the postwar partisan transformation in the South is class conflict driven by economic growth. We are not arguing that the economic transformation of the South did not play a role in the development of the Republican Party in the region, but it is not the key aspect of—or the primary mover behind—the growth of the Southern wing of the GOP. To understand the temporal and spatial dynamics of GOP growth in the region, we would argue that one must understand the politics of race. Stated succinctly, the partisan and political transformation of the South over the past half-century has, most centrally, revolved around the issue of race.

But is it possible that this racial dynamic has played itself out? If we are correct about the political dynamics that have gotten us to this point, then we may be very near the high-water mark of Southern Republicanism. Based on our analysis, the primary impetus for the growth of the Southern wing of the GOP was the increasing electoral strength of the African American population. A significant increase in black electoral strength would require one of the following: (1) a sizeable jump in the mobilization rate of the existing African American population, (2) a large increase in the relative size of the African American population, or (3) some non-trivial increase in *both* mobilization rates and population among African Americans.